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# Violence against Nursing Students in the Workplace: An Iranian Experience

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## Abstract:

**Background:** Workplace violence has a great impact on the quality of patient care and satisfaction. This study aimed to determine the extent of violence experienced by nursing students, and its predisposing factors.

**Methods:** This was a cross-sectional study which was conducted on 150 nursing students in teaching hospitals of Ardabil University of Medical Sciences. A questionnaire form was used for data collection.

**Results:** Participants stated they were abused physically (12.7%), verbally (73.3%), racial (40.7%), and sexually (5.3%). The lack of awareness of the population about the tasks of the nursing students (40.0%) was the most important risk factor for violence against them.

**Conclusion:** The violence against nursing students is a common problem in the workplace. It is mainly caused by the lack of awareness of people from the duties of the nursing students. Therefore, it is necessary to educate the population about the responsibilities of nurses and nursing students.

**Keywords:** violence, workplace violence, nursing students, Iran

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Violence is defined as any aggressive, physical, psychological, social, or economic action taken by an individual to harm others (May & Grubbs, 2002). According to the World Health Organization (World Health Organization, 2008), violence is “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, which either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, mal-development, or deprivation” (para 2).

Workplace violence is experienced in many parts of the world and is a serious threat to the physical and mental health of workers. Reports indicate an increase in violence in workplaces (Mantzuranis et al., 2015). The highest rate of occupational violence belongs to health care workers, police officers, drivers, and guards (Paludi, Nydegger & Paludi, 2006; Shives, 2008). According to Hislop and Melby (2003), although there is a risk of violence in any organization, this risk is higher in organizations providing health services. The incidence of workplace violence against medical staff has been increasing to the extent that they consider this problem as a part of their profession (Phillips, 2016). Nurses are also at high risk of being subjected to violence (Celebioğlu et al., 2010). Statistics in Europe show that 70–80 % of nurses, medical emergency personnel, and physicians experience one or more types of violence at work annually (Di Martino, Hoel & Cooper, 2003). According to the studies conducted in Iran, the level of occupational violence against nurses has been reported from 68.8 to 98.6 percent (Rahmani et al., 2012; Ghodsbin, Dehbozorgi, & Tayari, 2009).

Most studies about work-related violence have been conducted among health care workers and minimal research has been conducted on job violence towards nursing students. Yet, it seems that students are more exposed to workplace violence, due to their young age and insufficient clinical experience, compared to other hospital personnel. A study conducted by Aghajanloo et al. (2011) found that 6.7 % of nursing students have suffered from physical attacks and 39.4 % of them had been exposed to verbal abuse over the past year. Some of the main causes of violence against nursing students can be young age, male gender, low socio-economic status, psychiatric disorders, treatment rejection, personality disorders, and a history of violence in the patient’s family (Joubert, Du Round & Van Wyk, 2005; Kingma, 2001; Moreno-Cubillos & Sepúlveda-Gallego, 2013). Workplace violence is one of the most important factors in reducing the quality of work and job satisfaction of healthcare personnel; thus, it has a great impact on quality of patient care, satisfaction, and staff performance (Kisa, 2008). Mozafari and Tavan (2013) note that students report recurrent violence by frequent interaction with patients, caregivers, instructors, and other healthcare staff. Therefore, the current study was conducted to determine the prevalence and predisposing factors of violence towards nursing students in Iran.

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## Material and methods

This cross-sectional study was conducted in 2015. The participants were selected from the students in a Faculty of Nursing and Midwifery of University of Medical Sciences in Iran. One hundred and fifty nursing students who had completed at least a one-month internship at the hospital were selected randomly. Data were collected via a 43-item questionnaire which was designed by The International Labor Office, The World Health Organization, The International Council of Nurses, and The International Association of Public. The questionnaire included questions concerning demographic information (11 questions), threat (10 questions), verbal abuse (10 items), and physical violence (12 items). To assess its validity, the questionnaire was presented to eight members of the Nursing, Social Medicine, and Health departments and their professional opinions were considered and applied where needed. The reliability of the questionnaire was evaluated using test-retest ( $r = 0/89$ ). In order to analyze the data, descriptive statistics (frequency, mean, and standard deviation) and inferential statistics (chi-square test, Fisher exact test, and t-test) were conducted using SPSS 18 statistical software.

The ethical principles considered in this study included stating the aims of the research to the participants, ensuring the confidentiality of information, emphasizing the anonymity of the questionnaire, and the option to withdraw at any time during the study. Ethics approval was obtained from the research ethics committee of the University.

## Results

The majority of the participants were women (53.3 %), single (68 %), aged between 21–25 years (61.3 %), and mostly in their fourth academic year (63.3 %) (see Table 1).

**Table 1:** Demographic characteristics of the study population (N = 150).

Age	Gender		Marital status		Class	
18–20	47 (31.3)	Female	80 (53.3)	Single	102 (68)	1st year
21–25	92 (61.3)	male	70 (46.7)	married	48 (32)	2nd year
26–30	10 (6.6)					3rd year
No answer	1 (0.6)					4th year
						95 (63.3)

The results from the first research question “To what extent is the violence against nursing students in the hospital?” showed that 19 students (12.7 %) had experienced physical violence and 110 students (73.3 %) were recipients of verbal abuse. Sixty-one students (40.7 %) were racially harassed, and eight (5.3 %) suffered from sexual violence (see Table 2).

**Table 2:** Types of violence reported by participants (N = 150).

Type of violence	YES (%)	NO (%)	No Response (%)
Physical	19 (12.7)	131 (87.3)	
Verbal	110 (73.3)	40 (26.7)	
Racial	61 (40.7)	82 (54.7)	7 (4.7)
Sexual	8 (5.3)	138 (92)	4

With regards to the severity of violence against nursing students, 59 (39.3 %) suffered from high or very high levels of personal violence. Fifty-three (35.3 %) subjects experienced it as average, and 38 (25.4 %) students stated low levels of personal violence.

Answers about the perpetrators of violence showed that most of the violence towards nursing students in hospitals occurred by patient families (45.4 %), patients (25.3 %), and teachers (18.7 %) (see Table 3).

**Table 3:** Sources of verbal violence reported by participants (N = 150).

Source	N (%)	Source	N (%)
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Patient	38 (25.3)	Nurse	7 (4.7)
Patient Relatives	68 (45.4)	Supervisor	3 (2)
Teacher	28 (18.7)	No answer	6 (4)

The most common cause of violence against nursing students was the “lack of knowledge of the population about their responsibilities” (40 %). “Limited number of nursing staff” (28 %) and delays in carrying out the tasks (17.4 %) were among other highly rated causes of workplace violence (see Table 4).

**Table 4:** Predisposing factors of workplace violence against nursing students (N = 150).

Factors	N (%)
Drug or alcohol abuse by patients	5 (3.3)
Inadequate staff	42 (28)
Lack of security equipment	15 (10)
Patient's death	0 (0)
Delays in carrying out the work	22 (17.4)
Population's lack of awareness about nursing students' responsibilities	60 (40)
Lack of a clear program	3 (2)

With regards to the relationship between socio-demographic variables of students and the rates of hospital violence against them, t-test results indicated a relationship between age and physical and verbal abuse. With increasing age, physical violence was reduced ( $P = 0.03$ ) and verbal abuse increased ( $P = 0.01$ ). Chi-square test showed statistically significant associations between gender and the physical and racial violence. The average scores indicated higher levels of physical and racial violence among men compared to women ( $P < 0.0001$ ). In terms of violence based on the marital status of the participants, a statistically significant difference between physical violence and marital status was found. High rates of physical violence were reported among single individuals ( $P < 0.0001$ ). Lastly, the relationship between academic education and violence rates showed that students of lower semesters had experienced higher levels of verbal abuse ( $P = 0.005$ ), while no significant difference was reported regarding other forms of violence ( $P > 0.05$ ).

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to determine the extent of violence against nursing students and its risk factors. The results indicated high rates of violence against nursing students in that only 25.4 % of surveyed people reported their violence as low. This suggests a high rate of violence against nursing students in hospitals. Verbal abuse was reported as the most common form of violence (73.3 %) among the nursing students.

Similar smaller studies in the field of violence against nursing students presented various results some of which are consistent with the present study, while others had conflicting outcomes. For instance, in an epidemiological study about workplace violence against nursing students in Arak, Iran University of Medical Sciences conducted by Koohestani et al., (2011), verbal violence was reported as the most common form of violence (74.9 %). Keyvanara, Maracy, & Ziari 's (2015) research also showed similar results (78.4 %) in Isfahan, Iran, largely consistent with the findings of the present study. However, the studies conducted by Ferns and Meerabeau (2008), Longo (2007), and Tee, Özçetin, and Russell-Westhead (2016) reported lower violence rates among the nursing students (45.1 %, 34 %, and 42.2 % respectively). Celik and Bayraktar (2004) and Çelebioğlu et al.'s (2010) studies presented much higher rates. An important point to note while interpreting these differences is that the rate of hospital violence is correlated with the rate of social violence and it is also influenced by many other factors, some of which include economic and cultural issues (Cooley-Strickland et al., 2009). Hence, based on the results of this study, it can be suggested that the rate of violence is lower in first world countries compared to less developed countries. In fact, even within Iran, the rate of social violence is different in different regions and Ardabil province is reported as one of the areas where social violence is above the average of the country (Habibzadeh et al., 2016).

Regarding the perpetrators of violence, the results indicated that most violence experienced by the nursing students came from the families of patients, patients, and nursing instructors respectively. The results obtained from the study of Koohestani et al. (2011) indicated that the majority of the physical violence experienced by the nursing students was done by patients while verbal violence happened, in most cases, by patients' families (Koohestani et al., 2011). Jiao et al. (2015) also showed that 82 % of cases of violence against nursing students happened by patients' relatives (Jiao et al., 2015). The results of the present research are inconsistent with the

findings of Aghajanloo et al. (2011) in which patients were identified as the most important factor of violence, and Magnavita and Heponiemi (2011) who reported verbal and physical violence on the part of colleagues, staff, and others, including teachers, doctors, and supervisors.

The results of this research suggest that there is a lack of awareness by the population about the responsibilities of the nursing students. Additionally, limited staff members and delays in carrying out tasks are important factors associated with violence against nursing students in hospitals, consistent with Koohestani et al.'s (2011) study.

## Limitations

There were limitations in this research. First, given that topics related to interpersonal conflict are subjective and, importantly, are also retrospective, there was no way to verify responses. Second, students in the study setting may be more likely to experience aggressive events than those in some other parts of Iran, which are more rural or have a less mixed population. Third, the study was conducted in only one nursing school in Iran. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized to all nursing students.

## Conclusion

Findings of this study showed that violence against nursing students is a common problem in the workplace and is mostly due to the lack of awareness of the population about their responsibilities. Therefore, actions should be taken to prevent the violence imposed on nursing students in clinical settings. Thus, it is necessary to take steps to educate people about the duties of nurses and nursing students. Also, training on abuse should be available as part of nursing school curricula. This involves educating students on assessment, planning, and interventions to prevent or intervene in abusive behaviors from faculty, nurses, physicians, patients, patients' relatives, classmates, and others.

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